

Presentation by Dr. Howard Frumkin, Director, NCEH/ATSDR:
Understanding the National Conversation Purpose and Process

Dr. Frumkin provided the contextual framework for the development of the *National Conversation* and NCEH/ATSDR's vision for outcomes. This project envisions that chemicals will be used and managed in ways that are safe and healthy for all people. Achieving this vision requires accurate information about chemical use and exposure pathways, scientific understanding of chemical impacts on health, policies and practices to prevent or reduce harmful chemical exposures, emergency preparedness, and community service, incorporating environmental justice goals. He stated that people – including the public, healthcare providers, and policy makers – should have access to information necessary for decision making.

Dr. Frumkin stated that the United States has a complex web of legislation, agencies and organizations, research efforts, and training and degree programs that work to protect the public from dangerous chemical exposures. These efforts have led to some striking successes over the past 40 years, but the US has not yet fully achieved its public health goals. He pointed out that as new challenges are emerging, science continues to advance. The major task of the *National Conversation* is to identify areas for improvement.

The *National Conversation* will result in an action agenda for strengthening the public health approach to chemical exposures. The 18 months following the kickoff meeting will be used to pinpoint and prioritize gaps and redundancies and to identify solutions for consideration by key actors. Dr. Frumkin committed that NCEH/ATSDR will take seriously the recommendations that emerge from this process.

Acknowledging that recommendations that emerge from this process will not all be directed at NCEH/ATSDR, he expressed the hope that other agencies and other stakeholders also will be able to utilize those recommendations.

Dr. Frumkin acknowledged that while differences may occur during the *National Conversation*, core values are shared and will serve as a powerful foundation on which to build the *National Conversation*. He stressed that many improvement initiatives are already underway and that this project will neither slow down nor interfere with these initiatives. He committed to a voluntary, participatory, inclusive, and transparent process, aligned with President Obama's commitment to open government.

Dr. Frumkin explained that work groups would be formed around the same issues addressed in the breakout sessions and that other opportunities for public participation will include online discussions, a citizen conversation toolkit, and sector-based, regional, and local meetings. He described the project timeline and stated that the work groups should identify solutions that are practical and implementable within a reasonable timeframe, providing several examples of such recommendations. Dr. Frumkin concluded by thanking participants for their attendance and commitment to protecting public health in the context of chemical exposures.